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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of media in presenting information to society and emphasizes the need for English teachers to incorporate critical media awareness into education. Four postulations are identified that are at the core of teaching media as a form of textual construction: (1) all media are a construction, which represents conscious and unconscious decisions about what knowledge is valid and valued; (2) audiences negotiate meaning; (3) the curriculum represents ideology and values and has social and political implications; and (4) the nature of media messages can affect social attitudes and behavior. A group of 20 teachers attending a media literacy workshop at Pennsylvania State University in the summer of 1994 were asked to rate the frequency with which they undertook certain core critical media literacy activities; results revealed that teachers were not aware of what they could do about media in their language arts classrooms and that nonprint media are still an isolated phenomena in schools. The workshop encouraged teachers to work towards integrating forms of media literacy into their teaching and covered analysis of codes and conventions, personal experience, cultural and ideological meanings, and commercial overtones and economic strategies. A table depicts the teachers' ratings on media practice in the classroom. (Contains 12 references.) (AEF)

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Teaching Media: English Teachers as Media and Technology Critics

Ladislaus M. Semali

With television, an event is broadcast or ignored: either it is in enormous headlines or it is no where at all. This power to choose what the great mass of people shall see . . . is altogether too great to be left to the judgement of a few television companies and to private arrangements made by committees and commercial sponsors.
-- Walter Lippmann

Many homes in America have a television that is turned on for more than seven hours per day. Individuals spend more time watching television than any other leisure activity and, cumulatively, far more time in front of the television than school; only work absorbs more waking time.

Furthermore, polls reveal that more people depend on television for news and information than on any other medium or source and that it is the most trusted source of news and information (Broadcast/Cable Yearbook, 1989; Gilbert, 1988; Roper, 1981, cited in Kellner, 1990, p. 2). As Lippmann claims in the above quote, audiences have no control over what they hear or watch on television, radio, or see in newspaper headlines. However, they have a choice to flip the channel or turn the page for more news to satisfy their appetites or to abandon what is boring. They do not elect or decide what makes the news headlines or commercials of that day. It might be, as suggested by Andersen (1995, p. 1), what is considered objective news or innocent cultural shows may have been strategically placed with popular programs by advertisers in this age of commercial clutter. Thus, Andersen contends that in a highly competitive commercial market, advertisers strive to incorporate their products within the broader media environment. In this way, persuasive messages appear to be authentic sectors of the landscape of popular culture, rather than deliberate advertisements urging consumers to buy products.

Indeed the media, particularly, television has become the nation's teacher of choice. In a discussion of the socialization effects of television, Kellner (1982) argues that television has replaced fairy tales and myths as the primary producer of children's tales. Even in present day programming, television continues to be one of the most important producers of myths and

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symbols in the society. He concludes that television has become a powerful socializing machine. Both television entertainment and information may well gain in power precisely because individuals are not aware that their thoughts and behaviors are being shaped by the ubiquitous idea and image machines of their homes (Kellner, 1990, p. 126). In a broad sense, this means that television provides continuous education throughout life, offering a popular day and night school for the nation.

One day in October 1994, after the US invasion of Haiti, the Philadelphia Inquirer published a front-page picture shot by Carol Guzy, a photographer of the Washington Post. This picture captured the looting of a school warehouse in Port au Prince while the US troops looked on. The caption read: "A Haitian woman, clutching a sack of rice that is caked on her face, lies injured during a food riot at the Catholic school warehouse in Port au Prince. Groups of men fought over the food yesterday, attacking even women and children. Passing U.S. troops did not intervene" (Inquirer, 1994, p. 1).

Troubled and perplexed by this graphic picture, I wondered what it would mean to my American students. What images might this picture evoke in their minds? What do images of the poor and hungry mean for my students. So I took the picture to my pre-service student teachers. My concern was how much did they know about the US intervention in Haiti? Did they know anything of the history of U.S. intervention in the Caribbean--Grenada, Panama, and now once again Haiti? What pre-existing understandings about America and the developing world did they hold that allowed for their reaction to the picture? What role in forming those understandings was played by the mass media on this day, as on most others, was uncritical--even celebratory--of American military intervention?

I felt the need, more than ever, to understand the models of the developing world and of cultural difference, broadly shared by white, middle-class Americans, that many of our undergraduate students brought to the classrooms and that I myself struggle with and against.

After much consideration, I turned to the examination of network news, particularly the visual pictures presented as one of the most culturally valued and potent media vehicle shaping American understanding of, and responses to, the world outside the United States.

My interest was, and is, in the making and consuming of images of the non-western world, a topic raising volatile issues of power, race, and history. What does popular education tell Americans about who "non-Westerners are, what they want, and what our relationship is to them. As any other popular media in America, the network news exists in a complex system of artifacts and communication devices: newspapers and magazines, television news and special reports, museums and exhibitions, geography and world history textbooks, student exchange programs, travelogues and films from Rambo and Raiders of the Lost Ark to El Norte.

Yet these diverse contexts are in communication with one another, purveying and contesting a limited

universe of ideas about cultural difference and how it can or should be interpreted. To use television network news or newspaper photographs as pedagogical sights is to study not a single cultural artifact but a powerful voice in an ongoing cultural discussion of these issues. The history, culture, and social reality of North-South relations is primarily written, of course, in corporation boardrooms, government agency offices, and encounters between tourists, bankers, military personnel, and State Department employees, on the one hand, and the people of the Developing Nations on the other.

The role of a cultural institution like the Network evening news or the Philadelphia Inquirer and its viewers and readers, respectively, might seem small by comparison. But its role is not simply to form an "educated public," nor is it simply to mislead or err in describing those relations; it can also provide support for American state policies and for voting and consumer behavior (Lutz & Collins, 1993).

While a front-page picture of the Philadelphia Inquirer is seen as a straightforward kind of evidence about the world--a simple and objective mirror of reality--it is in fact evidence of a much more complex, interesting, and consequential world of reality. It reflects as much on who is behind the lens, from photographers to newspaper editors, and graphic designers to the readers who look--with sometimes different eyes--through the Philadelphia Inquirer's institutional lens.

A photograph can be seen as a cultural artifact because its makers and readers look at the world with an eye that is not universal or natural but taught to look for certain cues. It can also be seen as a commodity, because it is sold by a newspaper concerned with revenues.

The visual structures represented in the photograph, and the reading rendered by audiences, can tell us about the cultural, social, and historical contexts that produced them. An attempt to study visual structures leads us to the way in which meanings are offered to us and **our part** in actively making sense of them. It is important to keep in mind that the assumptions we make, what we consider as common knowledge or common sense, or "**general**" knowledge, or widespread beliefs and popular attitudes, are conventions we form as part of our cultural knowledge.

The fundamentally critical perspective I take on media and its social context is thus linked in a range of ways to deeply personal concerns. I am concerned with how to imagine and value difference, how to foster both empathetic forms of understanding and historically grounded perceptions. These perceptions emerge out of childhood and adolescent experiences and the choice one makes of adult work. My goal here is to bring a critical perspective into the ways media, such as newspaper photographs are constructed, to point out some of the prevailing cultural ideas about others through which any photograph of the non-Western world has often been filtered, and to raise questions about what could be done in the classroom and in the curriculum to develop such critical perspectives. This kind of critical theory of media must analyze the ways in which media images organize experiences and then attempt to specify their effects and

deconstruct their linguistic discursive positions.

We must ask: How do pictures -- both moving and still-- create for us an almost palpable world of objects and events? As a young professor at a state university, I am struggling to teach about cultural differences in ways that are meaningful to undergraduates in the 1990s and beyond.

My teaching of media texts as a form of textual construction is embedded in the assumption that audiences bring individual preexisting dispositions even though the media may contribute to their shaping of basic attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior. As summed up by Lusted (1991, p. 26), at the core of such textual construction are basic assumptions which include four postulations.

First, all media are a construction. Any media text--written or electronic, including in large part the school curriculum is a construction. Also, the worldview, information and perspectives created by both mass media messages and the school curriculum are primarily a construction of reality rather than reality itself.

In a nutshell, textual construction incorporates the way the media use conventions, how audiences make meanings from them, and how these meanings are applied within a cultural context (Lusted, 1991, p. 123). Such construction represents conscious and unconscious decisions about what knowledge is valid and valued.

Second, audiences negotiate meaning. While media content and the producer's intent are significant, different audiences respond to these messages in different ways. Similarly, the message and the method of presentation in our schools is accepted or rejected by students based upon their culture and needs including past experiences, racial, ethnic and socio-economic status.

Third the curriculum represents ideology and values and has social and political implications. Mass media messages are based on assumptions of truth and affect social and political behavior in a variety of ways. Rather than representing equality of opportunity or principles of equity, the content, organization, culture and climate of both education and the mass media as institutions privilege certain sectors of society while ignoring or marginalizing others. This can happen in the frequency of representations / responsiveness, or in the nature and quality of these representations and responses.

Fourth, the nature of media messages can affect social attitudes and behavior. Equally, the nature of the curriculum both plain and hidden, can affect social attitudes and behavior. For example, the self-esteem of minority audiences can be affected by negative representations. Such representations can also affect perceptions of majority students toward minorities.

For many people, individual attitudes and worldviews about others seem natural and common knowledge. What seems so natural is actually learned from our earliest moments and becomes part of our social experience.

It is not surprising therefore for teachers to take television for granted

sometimes. Today viewers everywhere tend to accept it as a window on the world, and to watch it for hours each day. Viewers feel that they understand, from television alone, what is going on in the world. They unconsciously look to it for guidance as to what is important, good, and desirable, and what is not. It has tended to displace or overwhelm other influences such as newspapers, school, and church. Thus, television has become our constant companion, in the home, in the hotel room, in the hospital--educating and entertaining us from the nursery school to the nursing home, from womb to tomb!

But as television and other electronic media grow in importance, social problems in America have grown proportionately. Although critics do not claim a cause and effect relationship, they have by and large accepted the proposition that violence, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy, result from a media culture that celebrates consumerism and instant gratification while tolerating undercurrents of prejudice and bigatory.

Author Richard Louv quipped, "Television hijacks so many parts of our brain, that it leaves little room for self-generated images and ideas . . . Television is simply a thief of time--of creative time, of family time" (cited in Aronson, 1994, p. 29).

In the span of a lifetime, television and other electronic media have replaced print as the primary medium by which we tell our stories, report our news and decide on our purchases--and our votes, particularly in an election year. It has become the definer and transmitter of a society's values (Barnouw, 1966, cited in Kellner, 1990).

Time has come for educators no longer to consider television and other non-print media as the enemy, thief or the ubiquitous bubble. Students feel the onslaught of the information age even more acutely than their teachers and are less capable of coping with its demands and of making sense of the complex world it presents. Teachers can help their students cope with this complexity by suggesting analytical frameworks and perspectives for sorting out and thinking critically about them.

Teachers as Critics

Teachers in many school districts in Pennsylvania pay little or no attention at all to television, perhaps because they accept TV as a given. The burgeoning media literacy movement which is seeking to change the relationship between the media and educators and to engage students in a critical analysis of television images and other mass media messages has not caught up in many Pennsylvania schools.

In assessing the level of critical media awareness, a group of 20 teachers attending a media literacy workshop at the Pennsylvania State University, Summer 1994, voiced their opinions about classroom practice when asked to rate the frequency with which they undertook certain core critical media literacy activities. On a scale from 1-5, the teachers indicated how often they undertook these core activities in their classrooms ranging from never, not very often sometimes, often, to very often. The mean scores of their ratings are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Teachers Ratings on Media Practice in the Classroom

	STATEMENT	Mean Rating
1.	I talk to my students, friends and colleagues about the media and its social and political influence.	2.83
2.	I no longer just turn on the TV or a video game; rather, I deliberately choose media experiences to which I want to be exposed.	4.17
3.	I seek out alternative sources for news and information.	4.11
4.	I teach my students critical viewing of television programs; thus enable them to detect bias or stereotypes of gender, race and ethnicity.	2.50
5.	I can readily identify common techniques used by advertisers to convince us to buy products, thus becoming less responsive to those techniques.	3.53
6.	I support smaller, local media outlets (newspapers, magazines, cable channels, radio, etc.).	4.32
7.	I create media experiences (videotapes, audio tapes, newsletters) that express my own viewpoints.	0.0
8.	I help my students identify needs the mass media fill in their own lives so that they begin to pick and use the media to meet those needs more effectively.	2.11
9.	I write letters to advertisers, TV stations, radio deejays, sitcom producers.	1.63
10.	I help my students to question the role advertising plays in fueling the consumer lifestyle, perhaps beginning to consume less and thus live more responsibly.	2.47

The teachers gave a high mean rating of 4.32 to activities that support local media outlets, followed by a rating of 4.17 to indicate that in fact they choose media experiences which they wish to watch or be exposed to. Even though teachers indicated that they often seek out alternative sources for news and information, there were no indications as to what these alternatives were.

The data revealed that teachers did not write to advertisers or TV stations or media producers to comment on programming or to express their opinions about bias or stereotypical programs. Activities engaging their students in the production of media were non-existent. These results, even though limited in scope are seminal in understanding how teachers view the media and whether they apply critical practice in their classrooms.

The overall picture shows that the teachers who participated in the workshop were not aware of what they could do about media in their language arts classrooms. Furthermore, nonprint media, especially those that are part of students' everyday lives, are still considered as isolated phenomena in schools.

Contemporary critical theory and media studies point out that the most glaring failure of US schools in this decade is the failure to situate learning in its cultural context (Sorenson, 1989). Many English

teachers, for example, still teach literature and literacy (reading) as if television, motion pictures, and computers did not exist. What we are still missing from the school canon are examples of the literary genres of our times: films, television series, serialized drama, and multimedia experiences, all of which provide their own versions of the best of human expression and aesthetic experience.

These new media provide their own criticism of life. They are for Barbara Tothrow, who leads classes in video production and media literacy at Alvirne High School in Alvirne, N.H., the new accent of the English curriculum. "It makes sense to teach our kids how to read this medium just as critically as we have traditionally taught them to read print" (Sorenson, 1988, p. 42).

As educators, we can no longer ignore the fact that increasingly, nonprint media -- including television, music, video, videotape, film, radio, compact disk, and hypertext for personal computers -- have become primary sources of information and recreation, as well as emotional and artistic experiences for Americans. Efforts like the teachers' workshop of Summer 1994 or the regional workshops sponsored by Newspapers In Education (NIE) group for teachers to learn how to use the newspaper to teach students how to deconstruct newspaper messages, can be a wonderful opportunity to develop students'
critical awareness in the media and how the media represent people.

In an attempt to forge new ways of integrating popular media across the curriculum, the summer workshop alluded to above, outlined areas of media literacy that could help teachers make a difference in English or language arts classrooms.

The workshop encouraged these teachers to join the estimated 3,500 teachers nationwide committed to work towards integrating forms of media literacy into their teaching. The workshop covered four areas: (1) analyzing codes and conventions of language, (2) analyzing personal pleasure, understandings, and experience, (3) analyzing cultural, ideological meanings, (4) analyzing commercial overtones and economic strategies.

Borrowing from the field of semiotics, an important area of study of textual analysis, all texts are constructions of meaning -- **constructed** through language. To many teachers and students, texts, like weekly television programs, newspaper articles or pictures like the one described above, might seem simple and obvious reflections of reality; but when teachers and students begin to read them critically (and deconstruct them as languages), they begin to understand them in a new light: as complex, technical constructions or representations of reality, not reality itself. What they may have often sensed, then, as "realistic" might more accurately be described as their familiarity with the codes and conventions of the language used to construct imagery.

As far as television is concerned, the conventions used seem so familiar to many students in our culture. For example, most television

programs use characters well known to viewers. These characters already appeal to a loyal audience with their established identities. It is acceptable for familiar characters whom viewers know and love--to smoke cigars and say "damn" (e.g., Northern Exposure), and to persuade audiences to purchase goods, services, and gadgetry they do not really need (e.g., Michael Jordan advertising for Nike; Whoopi Goldberg for AT&T or Candice Bergen (Murphy Brown) for Sprint).

Because of the dearth of media literacy awareness in classrooms, it is not surprising to find youngsters who study literacy and literature for 12 years and still graduate naive about the techniques and devices used to capture their attention and imagination, about the cultural codes that reflect and shape their thinking in their electronic literature. They have not been taught to be critics!

Inasmuch as today's children come to school from homes and communities which provide them with wide exposure to nonprint media, it is crucial that literacy education teachers draw upon this background, both to recognize the students' knowledge and to develop the students' critical thinking about nonprint media.

It is in this respect therefore that students must develop the knowledge, critical awareness and technical skills to become participants in, creators of, thinkers about, and commentators on, the nonprint media that are so pervasive an influence on their lives (Aronson, 1994, p. 31).

This means that teachers often must use materials that, while potentially controversial, need to be examined so students can confront the stereotyping, the deluge of propaganda, and editorial gatekeeping so prevalent in the media. Such study will allow students to discover how nonprint media works are indeed constructions of reality that have commercial, ideological and value messages.

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